

# General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy

## Part 3 of 12

Franklin Merrell-Wolff  
September 1971

With the suggestions with which we concluded Part 2, there are certain consequences which follow. Note first, that when Dr. Jung says that any metaphysical statement is only a statement concerning the structure of the mind, the reason why this should be so, I think is rather clear. Any statement that we can make would be valid only with respect to the forms by which we are functioning. We are not capable of making any statement concerning that which lies beyond the shell which we predicated in Part 2. We can only say that which is valid with respect to the doors or windows through which we cognized. These doors or windows are determinates as to the structure of our thinking, and proceeding in that way, through the use of our ordinary resources of sense perception and conceptual cognition, we can know nothing concerning that which lies beyond, or the thing-in-itself.

If there is the possibility of a truly metaphysical knowledge, something more is required. It becomes necessary, in that case, to break out beyond the capsule. And this leads to a consideration which I regard as the most important of my philosophical and psychological contribution. There is the door which is known as that of Enlightenment, Realization, or Mystical Consciousness, generally attained by a few individuals only while in a state of ecstasy, which is understood as a standing aside from the normal processes of consciousness. We now have to predicate that in our capsule it is possible to break out either through something like a rent or by the fabrication of a door which may be opened and closed. And this figure fits very well certain facts of our experience. It is well known that through certain conditions that are induced by chemical substances, a mode of consciousness can be attained which transcends the categories; but as this is an abnormal approach, it has the significance of effecting a rent in the capsule such that the individual involved is a victim of something that is beyond his command. On the other hand, through the development that is consummated by the practice of a true yoga, a door in the capsule can be fabricated so that the cognizing entity can penetrate into the zone beyond the capsule, unconditioned by the forms of perceptual consciousness and the categories of the understanding. And here, as reported, and as I myself have known it, there is that which is not conditioned by space and time or by the structure of our logic, but a way of consciousness which is totally different.

This, then, leads to what is known in my system of thought as the third function, faculty, or organ which I have called "introception." Concerning the psychology of the cognizing here, not much can now be said; but this is true of it, that the cognizer and the cognized fuse into an identity so that there is a knowing without inferring, without perceiving, without conceptual form. This, I suggest, would be a door to the truly transcendent or metaphysical.

February 14, 1972

Since dictating the last portion of the preceding discourse, a question has arisen which is of especial importance.<sup>1</sup> The question is, "What possible meaning can attach to the conception of a Universal Consciousness?" This question involves a considerable complexity, and preparatory to the offering of some ideas with respect to it, there are several considerations that we will have to present.

I direct your attention to a volume written by F. S. C. Northrop entitled *The Meeting of East and West*. There is a thesis presented in this volume that has a definite bearing upon our problem. In his extended discussion of the distinctive differences between Eastern and Western man, he has isolated this feature: first, that, in general, Eastern man is oriented to what he has called the "aesthetic continuum," while Western man is oriented to the "theoretic continuum". While it may very well be true that Dr. Northrop has exaggerated the distinction here, yet, nonetheless, there is a great deal presented by him which would support the distinction, and other evidence that has come before me would give it considerable importance. Yet, I would note this fact, that the Orient is not wholly oriented to the aesthetic continuum. And as an example of this, I would suggest the work of Sri Shankaracharya who in his philosophy is in a high degree theoretical in a positive, constructive sense; and Shankara is one of the very greatest of the East Indian philosophic thinkers. And, of course, there is an aesthetic component valued in the West and has its important history. Nevertheless, I think I would agree with Northrop's thesis, to this extent, that the aesthetic component is emphasized preeminently by Eastern man and the theoretic component by Western man.

Now, it is important to come to an understanding of what we mean by the *aesthetic* and by the *theoretic*. In Baldwin's Dictionary on the subject of *aesthetic* or *aesthetics*, we have the following presentation:

Relating to the beautiful in the broadest sense, i.e. as including (q.v.) the SUBLIME, COMIC, TRAGIC, PATHETIC, UGLY, &c., as in the phrases Aesthetic Feeling, Aesthetic Fancy, &c. Cf. FEELING, FANCY, EMOTION, SENTIMENT (aesthetic) [in the aesthetic sense]. The aesthetic is related to the agreeable, the useful, and the morally good, in that all are experienced as values. The qualities by which it is distinguished from these are stated variously by different authorities, but there is general agreement that the value experienced in the aesthetic field is regarded as objective (as contrasted with the agreeable), shareable, intrinsic (as contrasted with the useful), and is appreciated in a contemplative as opposed to a practical attitude of consciousness (as contrasted with the moral). [In a word,] Aesthetics is the science of the beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Although Wolff considers this audio recording a continuation of the "General Discourse on the Subject of My Philosophy," he is here referring to the audio recording "On Space," part 2.

<sup>2</sup> James Mark Baldwin, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York, Macmillan, 1911), 20.

But that is not the only or the most general use of the term. In the case of Baumgarten, it is:

the science of sensuous knowledge, supplementary and parallel to logic,  
the science of 'clear thinking,' or of the higher faculty, the intellect.<sup>3</sup>

Now, we have also the use of the term as it occurs in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by Immanuel Kant. The term here has the:

...content of a science of the *a priori* principles or forms of the sensibility,  
viz. space and time.<sup>4</sup>

The theoretic, in contrast to this, would be that which is concerned with the categories of the understanding, the development of thought, in the sense of an orientation to true ideas or conceptions. It is manifested in the formulation of a systematic science, as for example, the *Principia* of Sir Isaac Newton, or the theory of relativity of Albert Einstein. It is also exemplified in systematic philosophy, in the constructive sense, as in the absolute Idealism of Hegel, and, finally, in its most perfect development, in the formulation of a system of pure mathematics. What we will note here is that the aesthetic, in general, applies to that which we have viewed as the *perceptual* zone of cognition, and the theoretic to the *conceptual* zone of cognition; and all that we have said heretofore in the contrast of these two forms of cognition would be pertinent.

Now, Northrop has pointed out that in the Oriental treatment of the aesthetic component, there are two aspects designated as the *determinate aesthetic continuum* and the *indeterminate aesthetic continuum*. Apparently, he has isolated in the Western development only the *determinate theoretic continuum*, leaving the question, is there an indeterminate theoretic continuum also? I shall return to this question at a later time, as it bears upon what may be the very essence of my own contribution. But, returning to the subject of the aesthetic continuum, let us note these facts: the aesthetic continuum has a certain kinship with the philosophy of David Hume, but with this difference, that what David Hume derived was not a *continuum* but an aesthetic *manifold*; in other words, a presentation of the immediately experienced as a series of atomic entities, so that it was not a continuum. Northrop has pointed out that David Hume was not really, truly speaking, in his own functioning, an empiricist, but rather a logician who carried out the consequences of the ideas of John Locke and Bishop Berkeley with very keen acuity; and has pointed out also, that in William James we actually have the true empiricist in the sense of an immediate entering into the aesthetic field in separation from the conceptual. And William James found, as he reported, a "blooming, buzzing confusion"<sup>5</sup> without any identification of specific parts. It is something like a *flow* that does not mean anything in a conceptual sense if it is taken in its purity.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> William James, *The Principle of Psychology*, chp. 13 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 462.

One can try the experiment himself, and try to isolate the pure perceptual or aesthetic field without correlating it with any conceptions whatsoever. This exercise is not easy, as the correlation with conceptions is largely automatic as a result of habit. As we gaze upon the world about us, we see, so it seems, trees, mountains, books, buildings, brush, valleys, and so forth, but we have translated the immediacy into a series of conceptions; for ‘tree’, and ‘mountain’, ‘book’, ‘building’, ‘brush’, ‘valley’, are concepts. That is not what we experienced immediately; we experience immediately an impact, without differentiation, of many objects before our consciousness, and in their purity, they do not mean anything. It is something very much like what the Buddhist calls a flow or flux of sheer immediate states in the form of a continuum.

Now, this is the condition from which release is sought in the practice of yoga, since in this immediate flow there is much of suffering. Now, how is this release conceived? It is not by a movement over into a conceptual order, but, rather, by a movement from what may be called a *determinate* aesthetic continuum, to use the term of Northrop, to an *indeterminate* aesthetic continuum. This indeterminate aesthetic continuum is the state of release; in other words, the yogic attainment. It is Enlightenment; it is Realization; it is Mystical Unfoldment. This is stated in a very brief and short fashion.

Now, is it valid to view the Oriental treatment in this sense? There is much in Buddhism that supports it. I direct your attention first to Zen Buddhism. It is very destructive in its treatment of the conceptual order. Thinking one’s way through to the solution of a problem is discouraged. It is evident in the use of conundrums such as what is the meaning of one hand clapping; a question to which a rational answer is impossible. Here, through this practice, there is an effort to take the consciousness away from any conceptual habits, or theoretical habits, into a purely aesthetic movement in which we have involved both sense perception and intuition. If we think of the psychological functions as delineated by Dr. Carl G Jung, we can see that here is involved the three functions of sensation, feeling, and intuition, to the exclusion of true conceptual thinking—including the combination of intuition and thinking, which is different in its effect from the combination of intuition and feeling.

Now, in support of this, I direct you to a sentence which is to be found in the *Crystal Mirror*. I direct your attention to a sentence to be found in the article entitled “Absolute Perfection” by Herbert V. Guenther. And the sentence is:

It is intrinsic or aesthetic perception (*rig-pa*).<sup>6</sup>

The reference is to the state of consciousness to be attained. You’ll notice that it is aesthetic perception, not conception, but aesthetic perception, and intrinsic.

Now, let us consider the meaning of ‘intrinsic’. In Baldwin’s Dictionary, ‘intrinsic’ is given as:

Necessarily belonging to a thing or object of thought.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Herbert V. Guenther, “Absolute Perfection” in *Crystal Mirror* 1 (Emeryville, Calif.: Dharma Press, 1971): 31-38.

And in *The Century Dictionary*, we have:

. . . pertaining to the inner or essential nature; intimately characterizing; inherent; essential; genuine; belonging to the subject in its very existence.<sup>8</sup>

Now, let us next consider what is meant by the word ‘rig-pa’, a Tibetan term which appears also in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and is discussed in the first footnote on p. 96:

In an abstruse philosophical treatise, as herein, *rig-pa* refers to the consciousness in its purest and most spiritual (i.e. supramundane) aspect, and *shes-rig* to the consciousness in that grosser aspect, not purely spiritual, whereby cognizance of phenomena is present.<sup>9</sup>

Now, what we are dealing with in the case of *rig-pa* would thus appear to be equivalent to the indeterminate aesthetic continuum, in this case. It is Consciousness that is non-phenomenal, not concerned with phenomena; in other words, not concerned with objects but Consciousness in a pure sense. And this, I would like to point out, could be very well the meaning of the term Universal Consciousness.

Now there is a point in which I wish to make this observation, that the identification in the case of the article by Guenther is of the essential Consciousness, the pure non-phenomenal Consciousness, with the aesthetic; in other words, with perception as contrasted to conception. There is implied a devaluation of the whole conceptual order here, that it is desirable to avoid conceptualizing, and orient oneself to the perceptual or aesthetic order. *The Crystal Mirror* is a Buddhistic publication.

Another line of evidence which tends to support the thesis of Northrop is to be found by considering the radical skepticism of Nagarjuna. It will be remembered that Nagarjuna, in speaking of the Ultimate, said it is not Being and not not-Being; it is not both Being and not-Being; and is not neither Being or non-Being. This leaves one with the sense that there is nothing to be grasped at all. The first impression is that it is an absolute negation of any possibility of apprehension. But closer study brings forth this fact, that we are having not so much a metaphysical statement here as something which we might call epistemological criticism—a criticism of the conceptual process as capable of dealing with ultimate questions. And there is, of course, a certain validity in this, for certainly it is true that the categories of the understanding exclude from us the possibility of knowing reality or the thing-in-itself as it is in itself. What remains positive in all of this is the possibility of the emergence from the trapped consciousness in the world-about through the perceptual consciousness alone by emergence into the indeterminate aesthetic continuum.

---

<sup>7</sup> Baldwin, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, p. 566

<sup>8</sup> William Dwight Whitney, ed., *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Century Co., 1911), 3164.

<sup>9</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Oxford University Press, London, 1960), 96.

Since the aesthetic side of consciousness appears to be the side most emphasized in the Orient, and the theoretic side of consciousness is that which is most developed in the culture of the West, there are two possible attitudes which may be taken: one is that the West is fundamentally in error, that its standpoint is in some essential sense *adharmic*; second, that there are two possible ways by which release may be attained—one which is that which has been developed in the Orient, and has led to the emergence by Enlightenment, Liberation, Fundamental Realization, or Mystical Unfoldment, and that there is, though not yet well developed, a Western *way* which is a complement of the Eastern *way*, and which emerges by the attainment of that in the theoretical continuum which is analogous to the indeterminate aesthetic continuum, namely, something which we might call the *indeterminate theoretic continuum*. I'm not at all inclined to accept the disparaging evaluation of the Western genius that would be implied in calling it *adharmic*; but, on the contrary, maintain that there is a Western *way*, which though neglected, is nonetheless possible.

And now in speaking of the Western *way*, we must not make the mistake of regarding it as simply the path presented by the Christian religion, for the Christian religion is an import from the East, in this case the Near East and not the Middle or Far East. The Western *way* is not, therefore, identical with the Christian discipline. Rather, we would find it in that which was presented by Pythagoras in his orientation to number as fundamental to the religious goal, and which was carried out specifically by Plotinus in his orientation to the One.

This brings us into something of the strongest possible contrast; orientation to number is essentially orientation to the mathematical spirit, that which is the very heart of the Western genius as contrasted to the Eastern. It is the development of the theoretical component in its supreme form of perfection. My thesis is that this has been in the West, as well as in the East, neglected, and is a possible *way*. If it is not a possible *way*, the implication is that Western man, to obtain redemption or release, must deny his cultural roots, abandon that which is normal to him, and assimilate to himself that which is exclusively Eastern—that the East has truth and the West only error. I do not at all accept this conclusion. I do maintain that there is a Western *way* which is the normal and proper *way* of Western man.

The point here is of considerable importance. I recall to your attention something said by Dr. Carl G. Jung, namely, that the right *way* or method with the wrong man leads to wrong results. The right *way* or method is relative to the right man to use it; and that, therefore, for Western man, the true *way* is something which he must discover and not simply take over from the East a *way* that was the right *way* and is the right *way* for Eastern man, but is not the right *way* for Western man.

Nonetheless, in my own experience, I did receive aid of critical importance from one of the great Oriental philosophers. This was the philosophy of Sri Shankaracharya as interpreted by Paul Deussen in his book *The System of the Vedanta*. The impression I derived from this presentation was a kind of thought that did not very greatly differ from the spirit of our own thought, though it dealt with a subject matter that is not well developed in the West. The aid did not come from the more poetic works of Shankara such as the *Crest Jewel*, his *Century of Verses*, and so forth, but from the interpretation of the *Commentaries on the Brahma Sutras* as handled by Paul Deussen. Paul Deussen was

a Kantian, and in a considerable degree, I would say that in my own experience the effective crossing to the Oriental point of view was effected through what Immanuel Kant contributed as it influenced the interpretation of Shankara by Paul Deussen. The impression I derived was of a thinking that was essentially logical, and did not conflict with our theoretical approach. I did not have the sense of a strong orientation to the aesthetic component. But I must acknowledge this judgment may have been influenced by the interpretation imposed by Paul Deussen. Nonetheless, after acknowledging all of this, it does remain true that there is an element in Shankara that is much closer, at least, to the type of thinking characteristic of those who are oriented to the theoretical component, and this I found to be of fundamental importance.

In support of this, in Shankara we find an interpretation of the problem of man that contrasts with that which was formulated by the Great Buddha, and has been characteristic of the different schools of Buddhism since then. To introduce this I'll refer to a statement made by William James in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* when he made his search as to the common elements current in all religious systems and philosophies. He said he found only two features that were common to all religions: first, a recognition of a wrongness in the world; and second, an offering of a means whereby this wrongness could be corrected. But the interpretation of in what the wrongness consisted varied. Three outstanding formulations of in what the wrongness consists can be identified, and these are as follows.

First, we have the formulation given to us by the Great Buddha, who found the wrongness defined as a state of suffering of not only mankind but of all creatures, having certain marks that were common such as hunger, sickness, old-age, and death. And that what he sought was a correcting of this state of suffering. Buddha determined that the correction of this state of ubiquitous suffering lay in the attainment of the state of *Nirvana*, and the end, we may say, of all Buddhistic effort is to so attain a state of withdrawal, modified in some forms of Buddhism by the consideration that the attainment of the state of release from suffering, or Enlightenment, or Liberation, it is not enough that the individual alone should attain this, but that it should be attained by all creatures. And to this end, it is insisted that every individual take the vow of *Kwan-Yin*, not to accept release for himself alone, but to work for the release of all creatures. Nonetheless, the end is liberation from suffering. The four noble truths may be stated this way: all creatures desire liberation from suffering; seek, therefore, the causes of suffering and expunge them; by entering the Path, liberation from suffering is attained; exhort, therefore, all creatures to enter the Path. We may say that all the elaboration of the various schools of Buddhistic philosophy may be viewed as simply expedient devices for the attainment of this end.

Now, if we turn to Shankara, we find a certain parallelity in the broad view that Liberation is the goal which is attained by the Realization of *Moksha*, which is but another name for *Nirvana*, but the formulation of the wrongness takes a different form. Shankara finds the wrongness due to the state of *avidya* or ignorance, and the cure is found by the attainment of true *vidya*, or *jnana*, the state of spiritual knowledge—not merely knowledge in the conceptual sense. Now, here is a difference of emphasis. To be sure, the Buddhist would agree that the attainment of true spiritual wisdom is the means for, or at any rate a primary means, for the elimination of the problem of suffering, but the primary emphasis is upon suffering, whereas with Shankara the emphasis is upon ignorance. No doubt, ignorance produces suffering, but the emphasis is on ignorance.

And here I think we have revealed an important difference in psychological perspective. Is the condition viewed primarily as one of suffering or one of lack of knowledge? If one's emphasis is placed upon the element of suffering, then we can see that there is an emphasis implied, if not explicit, upon the principle of feeling, of hedonic tone, that is, the quality of sympathy, of delight versus suffering, upon qualities that belong more to the side of sentiment rather than the side of knowledge; therefore, an emphasis upon what may very properly be called the aesthetic component. But when Shankara places his emphasis upon ignorance versus knowledge, in the spiritual sense, though it does not deny that suffering is involved, it means that the crucial emphasis is upon the cognitional factor, the knowledge factor. And this, I suggest, is due to a difference in psychological emphasis, and that Shankara comes closer to the theoretical spirit of Western man than does the more aesthetic Buddhist. At any rate, in my own experience it worked out this way.

Just incidentally as a sort of extended footnote, we might direct our attention to another way or viewing the wrongness in the world, a way that is much more characteristic of traditional Western religiosity, namely, the Christian point of view; though as I pointed out, this is not a religiosity that was indigenous to the West, but was imported from the Near East. The formulation of the wrongness here—it may not be so largely identified with the extant teachings of Christ as with the conceptions of St. Paul—it is the view that the wrongness with which man deals is due to a perverse will, a tendency to do those things which he knows he should not do, and to leave undone those things which he knows that he should do. This means that we have an emphasis upon will, and that the wrongness cannot be corrected by knowledge, but simply by a purification of the will. And it may well be that here we have something that is conceived as beyond the power of the individual man, and that therefore he depends upon a transformation introduced into his consciousness from an extraneous source, namely, the one whom he calls the Christ, that he conceives of himself as being unable to save himself and must be saved by something outside and beyond him because he finds his will essentially perverse.

Now, I would suggest that there are human types of which this may be properly true, but it is not valid to view it as universally true, for there are those among us who would agree with Socrates when he said that to know the good means that the individual cannot do other than the good. With an imperfect knowledge, no doubt it may be different, if there is uncertainty one may act contrary to his presumptive judgment of the good, but if there is certainty, Socrates affirmed it is impossible for one to act contrary to that certainty.

For myself I would say that of these three orientations—namely, that to suffering, which is *affective* primarily; of that to ignorance as constituting the basis of the wrongness, which is primarily *cognitive*; and to the idea of a perverse will, which is primarily *conative*, or orientation to the activist aspect of consciousness—I would say that my own orientation is to the cognitive factor, that self analysis reveals a fundamental agreement between my own psychology and that formulated by Socrates, namely, that to know unequivocally the good is to render one incapable of willing otherwise than for that good.

All of these positions, I would say, have their zone of validity, but the individual in choosing a *path* should become acquainted with his own psychology, and not try to



orient himself to a *path* that is alien to that psychology. If he finds within himself a certain essential perverseness of the activist element in his consciousness, he may have to employ the more or less violent methods that are typical of the Christian discipline; I mean violent, here, in the sense of psychological violence. If he finds himself oriented most to the affective or feeling side of consciousness, he may find the wrongness primarily in an emphasis of suffering, and would, then, find his best discipline in one of the systems of Buddhism, or something akin to that. But if he finds his primary reality-value in the cognitive side, then wrongness to him may well appear as due simply to ignorance, and the cure of wrongness in every sense is by the attainment of knowledge in the sense of *jnana* or spiritual knowledge.